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ABSTRACT

Findings of television research conducted in Montreal and Windsor, Canada, in February-May 1978, that studied numerous aspects of the parent-adolescent-television relationship are summarized in this report. Particular emphasis is given to differences between ethnic and English families, differences in the ways adolescent boys and girls perceive values in programming, and the role of the family. General findings are briefly noted and explained, while 13 major findings are listed and expanded upon with discussion. (JD)

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PARENTS, ADOLESCENTS & TELEVISION

Culture
Learning
Influence

A Report to the Public

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Findings reported are from a research
study completed in Montreal and Windsor, Canada
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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The TV family is the most important new link between youth and parents. Programs such as Eight is Enough and All in the Family are learning tools for adolescents and parents about topics they would otherwise probably not discuss. Watching the programs together generates lots of discussion about important topics like sexual permissiveness, the pill, drinking, religion, honesty in relationships, etc.

The behavior of children is the responsibility of parents. Television is only being used to reinforce social and moral behavior already learned. All 10 and 14 year olds studied perceived positive social values positively and negative social values negatively almost 100% of the time (one boy wondered what would happen if the "bad guy" was allowed to win once in a while).

Television has been blamed for the shortcomings of parents.

Adolescents more than pre-adolescents complain that parents have no time to spend with them, no interest in what interests them, or no desire to "talk" to them, not lecture, about the things of concern to adolescents. This was confirmed by refusals of many parents to watch favorite TV shows of their children and reluctant acceptance of others.

Ethnic parents have stronger concepts of themselves as parents and exercise discipline, require obedience, good behavior and respect and administer more love and guidance than English parents. The results are fewer problems in these areas and more positive attitudes of ethnic youth toward their parents.

Ethnic parents exercise more control over who their children associate with, where they go, what they do. They also do more with their children

than English parents. The only observed objection of ethnic youth was for more freedom. There was no mention of less rules or guidance or shared activity.

Most children select prosocial TV programs for regular viewing. Their heroes generally serve as models of behavior, attitude and value reinforcement. This finding, when coupled with the finding that children select heroes and programs that reinforce family values show television to be a positive help to parents and not the cause of anti-social behavior.

Disapproval of violence, killing, brutality, getting bad ideas was the attitude of practically all children in the study as well as parents. Parents made more objections to sex on television.

Based on findings, we predict strong parental disapproval of the new MAKE LOVE, NOT WAR program policy of the networks and already evident.

Parents object to Soap, Charlie's Angels, Three's Company and What's Happening. Adolescents are aware of the sexual implications only in Soap and Three's Company. Charlie's Angels is attractive to them because "women are doing a man's job, female equality." What's Happening is "funny and they like the stars." No sexual implications were perceived nor was little learned of value in social behavior.

Pre-adolescents and adolescents will watch what their parents watch, good or bad if parents permit it. Therefore, much viewing choice and judgment is the result of what parents do with television.

Traditional values are still strong within the family but ethnic families are more value oriented than English families. Girls and mothers are more value-oriented than boys and fathers.

14 year old girls are significantly more positive-value oriented, and ethnic 14-year old girls are the most positive-value oriented of all.

When adolescents watch television with many values being explored, they make immediate judgments about the correctness or incorrectness of what they are seeing. They recall events in programs, they judge the events and express what they would have done in a similar circumstance. They are able to relate most events to events in their daily lives making correct-transfer to new topics and new situations of the judgments they made.

Girls observe and react to more often expressions of sympathy, empathy, pity, understanding, affection than boys. Boys react to justice or fairness, logic, trust, achievement, lack of caring more than girls.

Communication and shared activity are the most sought after experiences of youth with parents. They are actions always perceived and admired in TV families. Children equate lack of communication and lack of shared activity with parents not caring about them. Children, especially ethnic children, who enjoy these privileges, prize them greatly. Children who don't experience them, desire them greatly.

Non-Canadian programs are preferred by parents and children. The reasons for the choices are significant. Television viewing is a personal identity experience, not a national identity experience. They are attracted to what they view as realistic portrayal of life and the opportunity to become immersed in the characters and plot and later to use what they learned about solving problems. TV problem situations are perceived as realistic, commonly experienced and often problems that are difficult to solve without help. Resolutions of problems on TV are perceived as helpful in helping parents and youth think about how they are going to solve the problem as it exists in their own lives.

The most popular programs are those that use a problem as the basic plot.

ETHNIC FAMILIES ARE MORE VALUE-ORIENTED THAN ENGLISH FAMILIES, AND PERCEIVE THEIR ROLES AS PARENTS MORE STRONGLY THAN ENGLISH FAMILIES.

Ethnic families list more values as important to their culture, and perceive more positive values in television programs than their English counterparts.

Ethnic parents feel they have a right to be authoritative, to set rules and regulations for the proper upbringing of their children. They demand more obedience and respect, give more love and guidance, and expect more good behavior.

English families perceive more negative values in programs (disrespect, disobedience, lying, etc.) and complain more of lack of discipline in their children than their ethnic counterparts.

Ethnic parents seem to give more love and share more activities with their children than English families.

The principal complaint of ethnic adolescents is lack of freedom. This appears to be related solely to mobility, choice of where to go and who with.

THE TV FAMILY IN A SERIES DISCUSSING PERTINENT PROBLEMS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT LINK CREATED RECENTLY TO BRIDGE THE GENERATIONS AND GENERATE DISCUSSION.

Fictional characters and situations offer a "safe" opportunity for both sides to discuss "hot" issues that neither wants to raise with the other directly because it is too threatening.

By commenting on the actions and statements of the characters and discussing the problem and solution of the characters, parents and their adolescents can discuss the solution chosen, other possible solutions, differing viewpoints and beliefs, without arguing or accusation, since they don't have the problem.

Even though they disagree, the fact of airing the issue seems to be beneficial.

ALL IN THE FAMILY AND EIGHT IS ENOUGH WERE THE TWO MOST SOCIALLY SIGNIFICANT PROGRAMS FOR PARENTS AND ADOLESCENTS.

Based on responses, more problems are discussed on these series than other prosocial programs. The reality of the problems and the ways in which they are treated in the stories make them very believable. (Need for parents to spend time with their children)

Parents find these series instructional and good models for solutions to problems of behavior, attitudes and values. (tolerance, respect) Adolescents find these series informative and of great value as guidelines for behavior, attitudes and values in present and future situations they expect to encounter in life. (prejudice, the Pill, etc.) Children and parents identify strongly with the characters - children with children, fathers with father image, and mothers with mother image.

Problem solving techniques were perceived and approved of, but in many cases children and parents reported using the techniques in their own lives. (Role reversal strategy used in "Eight is Enough")

These programs generate more discussion of greater significance than others. These discussions appear to pen up other possibilities for discussion (other problems).
While parents and adolescents are generally in agreement on how most problems are solved they state that they benefited just from talking about the problem, one generation to the other.

HEROES AND HEROINES OF ADOLESCENTS REFLECT WHAT THEY HOPE TO BE LIKE. CHILDREN AND PARENTS WITH STRONG ETHNIC IDENTITY ARE ATTRACTED TO ETHNIC HEROES AND HEROINES.

Whether the characteristics adolescents and pre-adolescents admire are strength, intelligence, kindness, cooperation, lovingness, or simply clever, characters are chosen for qualities as well as physical attributes.

All children perceive their heroes and heroines as GOOD. In answer to a question "would you change your mind about your hero if he did something "bad", they unanimously rejected the idea that the person could still be a hero. "Heroes are good. If he is not good, he is not a hero".

Blacks choose Blacks, Italians, Italians, Jewish, Jewish, and so on. If a child can't find or doesn't need identity with the ethnic group he chooses the hero closest to his other aspirations or qualities he admires.

WHAT PARENTS WILL VIEW, CHILDREN WILL VIEW, GOOD OR BAD.

TV program selection standards begin at home. While program taste is individual, most children will select programs in accordance with the attitudes and values of the family.

This finding supports the prior research findings in other countries that parents instill values and set standards for their children.

When this finding is considered with the finding that most children hold the same values as their parents, it can be expected that choice of program is largely determined by what parents have taught their children.

If parents watch objectionable shows, it must be expected that children may eventually want to watch as well. It can't be, "Do as I say, not as I do".

MORE ETHNIC CHILDREN ARE WATCHING MORE OF THE CONTROVERSIAL SEX-ORIENTED SHOWS THAN THEIR PARENTS OR ENGLISH FAMILIES.

Soap, Charlie's Angels, Three's Company, considered objectionable by parents, were selected by ethnic adolescents as one of three favorite programs.

A less significant amount of English adolescents were watching Charlie's Angels.

No parents were watching any of the three programs or were attracted to them enough to list them.

All of the programs were being watched for reasons other than sex, "Humor, female equality, the great 'put on' (Soap), like Jack", etc.

Watching Soap appears to be daring and to impress adolescents peers.

PARENTS ARE MORE VOCIFEROUS AND SPECIFIC IN THEIR DISAPPROVAL OF SEX ON TELEVISION THAN VIOLENCE.

- dirty shows bad for kids
- object to adult movies during family hour
- sex films shocking
- sex bad for kids
- Soap subject matter objectionable
- sex shows result in improper sex training
- object to raw sex
- soap operas are bad example for children
- Baretta if filthy, suggestive
- Three's Company is not for children

A child states "my parents say I can't watch Soap and Three's Company"

MAKE LOVE, NOT WAR seems to be the new themesong of the networks. Based on reactions in our study, there will probably be a faster parent reaction to the sex takeover of prime time from violence than there was for violence.

SOAP ELICITS MORE RESPONSES HAVING NEGATIVE VALUES AND APPEARS TO CREATE CURIOSITY AND INFORMATION SEARCH IN ADOLESCENTS REGARDING ISSUES DISCUSSED.

Adolescents are more interested in the topics than the characters of Soap with the exception of Benson.

The series seems to stimulate the curiosity of adolescents, i.e. sex change.

Soap characters are not perceived as realistic, individually or as families.

Soap is seen as making fun of the stupid things people do.

Soap characters are perceived as holding values opposed by parents. "My parents would kill me if I did that,...if they knew I knew that,... if I were like that..."

ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND BOYS PERCEIVED THE VALUES IN PROGRAMMING DIFFERENTLY.

The analysis of the responses obtained from adolescent girls and boys appears to support the prior research that girls perceive a greater number of prosocial values than boys.

Love, affection, communication, encouragement, support, cooperation, compromise, help and understanding were reported more often by girls than boys.

Fairness, trust, achievement, were reported more often by boys than girls.

On antisocial dimension, girls attended more often to lack of understanding, cooperation and help. Boys attended more often to lack of care and affection.

Boys perceive more physically aggressive acts.

Girls perceive more verbally aggressive acts.

Pre-adolescents (10 year olds) perceive few values at all, reporting that heroes are good, and that they solve problems without hurting or killing if possible. They perceive that heroes and heroines only hurt the bad people.

Ten year-olds know that the programs they watch like $6,000,000 Man and Bionic Woman are not real. Plots are perceived as possible. They are more attracted to action than value and expect the hero to do good.

CANADIAN ADOLESCENTS AND PRE-ADOLESCENTS USUALLY SELECT TV PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT FAMILY VALUES.

This finding supports research in other countries that selective viewing of children supports the ideals of the family, particularly in the important adolescent period.

Fourteen year old girls select and perceive more positive values in the programs they watch than boys.

Ethnic fourteen year old girls are the most value-oriented. They select more pro-social programs and perceive more pro-social values than their English counterparts and boys.

When parents view prosocial programs with their adolescent children, more positive values are seen and discussed.

COMMUNICATION AND SHARED ACTIVITY ARE THE TWO MOST SOUGHT AFTER VALUES ON THE LIST OF ADOLESCENTS AND PRE-ADOLESCENTS REGARDING PARENTS.

On the initial questionnaire and during the repeated visits to the home, responses of children indicated that talking with parents and doing things with them were, for the child, the clearest demonstrations that they were loved. Children whose parents don't have time for them, feel their parents don't love them, care about them, or are interested in them.

Whether a child enjoyed these experiences with a parent or was denied them by circumstance, they were seen as the most desirable things a parent could do for a child.

Communication and shared activity in the plots of television programs were seen and highly valued by viewing children. TV parents were praised by them for doing these things.

GOOD TELEVISION IS LIKE GOOD LITERATURE, DRAMA, MUSIC OR ART - IT IS UNIVERSAL IN APPEAL. IT HAS NO NATIONAL LABEL OR CHARACTER WHERE THE VIEWER IS CONCERNED.

Canadian viewers, while watching TV for escape as people in other countries do, also select quality programs for the same reasons they select good books, films, drama and so forth.

National interest or identity does not enter into the selection of programming. Personal identity and taste, usefulness or need for fulfillment as the academic community calls it, are the principal reasons given. Value of the topics discussed was another.

The more real the character is as a person or in performing a role, the more the viewer becomes involved with the character.

This is the point on which policymakers and viewers stand widest apart. Only one Canadian program was reported as regularly viewed in a list of more than 60 programs - Front Page Challenge. Two British programs were reported - 2 Ronnies, George and Mildred; French movies were the choice of one ethnic father, along with U.S. cartoons.

Our findings support government statistics that 95% of Canadians watch non-Canadian TV programs.

THE VALUES HELD BY FAMILIES ARE A DISTINGUISHING FEATURE OF THEIR OUTLOOK AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS PARENTS AND AS VIEWERS

The more value-oriented parents are, the more they carefully select what they view and what their children may view.

The more value-oriented parents are, the more they expect of television as a value reinforcement tool.

Fathers are the least value-oriented and use television most for relaxation and escape.

Some parents appear to have lost the courage to act as parents and exercise any influence or control over their children. This is interpreted as permissiveness by adolescents.

Some parents wish to avoid argument and confrontation at all costs in spite of the consequences for themselves and their children.